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ABSTRACT

The instructor of two twelfth grade English classes, one a composition class and the other a general English class, gave both classes some exercises in sentence combining. In the first exercise, the students were given two sentences and told to devise as many combinations as possible. While the composition class contributed more combinations than the general class students, the general class stuients were more enthusiastic, and more adept at spotting fragments and run on sentences. The instructor then gave both classes a series of combining exercises for paragraphs, which the students completed successfully. The last two exercises were prepared by the students. In the first, a text paragraph was "chopped up" into a sentence combining exercise by one student, the sentences were rewritten by another, and the paragraph compared to the original. In the final exercise the process was repeated but with the students writing their own paragraphs before "chopping" them up. The composition class produced superior exercises suitable for later instructional use, and the general class students, particularly those with severe writing problems, showed the greatest improvement with the best writing they had done in the class. (HTH)

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SENTENCE COMBINING: FROM THE TEXTBOOK TO THE CLASSROOM

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SENTENCE COMBINING: FROM THE TEXTBOOK TO THE CLASSROOM

At the October, 1979, Ohio Council of Teachers of the English Language Arts Convention held in Zanesville, I heard a presentation by Max Morenberg of Miami University (Ohio) which dealt with the extensive use of sentence combining in the teaching of writing. Morenberg detailed a 1976 study which used almost 300 Miami University freshmen to test the effectiveness of two methods for improving composition skills. Half the students followed the "traditional" methods; the other half used sentence combining exclusively. The result, as judged by a panel of experienced college instructors, found the sentence-combining students writing original compositions superior to the compositions of the traditionally-trained students. Morenberg also made available to us copies of his book The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining (co-authored with Donald A. Daiker and Andrew Kerek of Miami University. This book was based on the findings of this experiment.

The Morenberg presentation brought to mind some of the readings I'd done during the Youngstown State University Summer, 1979, Institute for the improvement of the teaching of the English Language Arts. Most notable of these materials were the chapter on syntax in Maria P. Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, Kellogg W. Hunt's"Early Blooming and Late Blooming Syntactic Structures" from the Cooper-Odell collection Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging, and several selections from the N.C.T.E. publication Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1977-1978: Teaching the Basics--Really! After re-reading these articles and adding some others to my personal library, I decided to make sentence-combining a more important part of the writing program in my English classes. What follows is an explanation of how I did just that.

The two classes I decided to "experiment" with were twelfth-graders: one a college preparatory composition class of twenty students and the other a general English class of almost thirty. The composition class was a twelve-week mini-course devoted completely to writing; the general class was the more traditional full-year course with composition only part of the curriculum. All of the students in the college preparatory class are planning to go to college, while only six of the general class express any interest in continuing their education. Of that six, only two have actually applied to a university (to the best of my knowledge).

I decided to start both classes with the same sentence-combining materials and then to continue through a series of exercises letting the ability of the respective classes determine both difficulty and the speed of progression from one exercise to the next. I realized from the beginning that mere comparison of the results would be of little value, since the composition class possessed the more skilled writers (particularly in the area of sentence structure). One of the problems with the college prep class was the elimination of awkward construction patterns to bring about a more "sophisticated" presentation. Many students in the general class were still having considerable problems with run-on sentences and fragmentation. With all this in mind, I decided that what I sought was, quite logically, as much improvement as possible for each individual in each class. The results would be difficult to tabulate and in many cases would have to be based solely on teacher judgment, but since so much evaluation of writing is subjective anyway, this didn't seem to be much of an obstacle.

The exercise I used as a starting point was borrowed from Morenberg, and I approached it more as a "game" than as a genuine class assignment. I placed the two simple sentences "I was surprised" and "Jane arrived late" on the board and challenged the classes to see how many legitimate sentences they could make

by combining them. We did a few of the most logical combinations together ("I was surprised when Jane arrived late!" or "I was surprised by Jane's late arrival."), after which I suggested various ways to find new beginnings for the possible combinations.

Any chance of keeping the classes together was eliminated almost immediately. The college prep classes asked one or two general questions and started combining. By the end of the period, the least number of combined sentences any student had produced was seventeen and the most was thirty-one. The general class, however, needed prodding to get them started and periodic hints of new combinations to keep them going. When we checked totals, the most from any student was sixteen and the least was three (several students didn't turn in their papers).

The following day we went through the lists and discussed the various combinations. The college prep class sailed through the assignment with little difficulty--and after about fifteen minutes, began to lose interest. The general class, however, despite having fewer combinations to begin with, really got into the discussion and spent the entire period trying a variety of approaches and combinations. The class was enthusiastic, to say the least. When they discovered that there was no one way the sentences had to be done and that there were many equally correct structures, the number of volunteers increased until virtually all of the students had contributed in one way or another. What pleased me the most, even more so than the class involvement, was the fact that as the combinations were offered, the rest of the class would respond with a judgment of its correctness. Run-ons and fragments were spotted immediately, and seemingly, almost with total class recognition. Everyone was involved! Judgments, usually correct, were being made. And the enthusiasm continued until the period ended. From that first simple assignment, the course of the sentence-combining experiment was determined. While the college prep class

would handle the exercises with skill and willingness, the general class would make the most dramatic and enthusiastic gains. Both would show improvements, but while the results of the college prep class would be of a higher quality, the general class results would be more evident. Both results were fine with me!

The next phase of the program was to do a variety of sentence-combining exercises, beginning with some fairly simple ones and progressing through the more difficult. For this, I used a variety of sources. Some exercises were from English texts available in our department library, some I made up, and the rest--and I felt, the best--came from the Morenberg text, The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining. Granted that many of the exercises in this book were designed for college students, there were still quite a few which were easily adaptable to my class. Moreover, these exercises were designed to create entire paragraphs, not just isolated sentences--and the subject matter of each exercise was carefully selected in an attempt to make them as interesting as possible. Consequently, my classes were both amused and challenged by them, and I'm positive that par[illegible] my students' success came from this careful exercise preparation.

Both classes did well with the exercises, and no sooner finished one set when they were eager for the next. I did a total of six sets with the general class and eight sets with the college prep class before moving on to the last phase of the program.

By now, even the most difficult of the exercises were being combined satisfactorily by most of the students--and while some of the general students were having more difficulty than were the college prep students, the results of many of the exercises were very similar.

At this point, we had two more exercises to do, only with a difference. Both of these were to be prepared by the students themselves. The first exercise

called for the students to select a descriptive paragraph from any selection in our literature text. The paragraph should be at least four or five sentences long. This paragraph was then to be "chopped up" into a sentence-combining exercise which would eventually be written by another member of the class. We did several samples together before they were asked to create their own. We spent one class period developing the sentence-combining exercise making sure that each was set up in a form similar to the others we had been doing. When this was completed, the next class period was spent with the students exchanging papers and writing paragraphs from each other's exercises. When the paragraphs were written and returned, students had the opportunity to compare their version with the original version from the text.

The student paragraphs, while usually quite different than the original, were generally good--and acceptable! Many of them did contain phrases and/or sentences very similar to the original but only rarely were they anywhere near being carbon copies. What they learned was that they could write good, solid, acceptable paragraphs--and at times their work came very close to the work of the original professional authors. They seemed genuinely pleased with themselves.

The last phase of the program, and from my point of view, the most important, was for each student to write a descriptive paragraph of their own and then "chop" it up into a sentence-combining exercise. These would also be exchanged and written by others in the class and the paragraphs compared with the originals. If the sentence-combining exercises were going to have any effect on student writing, the newly-created paragraphs would show those effects, particularly in the general class. Since we had done some paragraph work earlier in the year, I had something on which to base a comparison. And as we had done the various exercises, I had continually stressed organization and detail as well as sentence structure and completeness. (While some students' writing had shown some

improvement prior to our sentence-combining work, I had never been very pleased with the overall performance of the general class). The college prep students, while stronger writers, still needed some refinements. If the sentence combining did nothing more than improve some awkward and/or faulty construction, it would be worth the effort.

This phase of the program took several days to complete and went very smoothly. I had little or no trouble getting the students to produce their own descriptive paragraphs, and the time spent developing the sentence-combining exercises from them was perhaps the most satisfying part of the entire unit. The students in both classes worked diligently and thoughtfully on their creations--and the results were excellent. The college preparatory class produced exercises of a superior quality, many of which I intend to incorporate into future sentence-combining units. The general class' exercises, while not as sophisticated, were nevertheless quite excellent and, in most cases, far superior to anything the students had done for me in the past. A number of these exercises will also become a part of the unit. While I was pleased with the work of the college prep class, I was overjoyed with the work of the general class. While their exercises generally were not up to the quality level of the college prep class, the overall improvement of their work was greater and the exercises developed by some of the individuals was at least comparable to, if not actually better than, some of the material produced in the college prep class. Most satisfying, however, was the work of several of the general students who had severe writing problems. Their descriptive paragraphs were by far the best writing they had done for me, and the sentence-combining exercises they developed from them showed understanding and creativity.

The last phase of the unit was to write the paragraphs from these student-created exercises, and again the quality of the writing showed considerable improvement over earlier exercises. The sentence structure of the college prep

class was excellent and showed real sophistication. The paragraphing and the lack of fragments and run-ons were what impressed me most about the general class. But the most satisfaction came from watching and listening to the students, particularly those in the general class. They all knew that they had done good work, and they were pleased with their improvements and proud of themselves for being able to improve. There was a great deal of sharing of paragraphs by a group of smiling seniors. That last couple of days convinced me that sentence-combining can be a valuable tool in the teaching of writing, and I have two classes of students to support that belief.

While there may have been some backsliding in the months since we did the exercises, it is my judgment that what the "experts" have been saying about sentence-combining is true. It can improve student writing, or at least it has in my classes. I am very much aware of the ease with which I've seen students improve awkward and confusing passages by using sentence-combining techniques, and I am very much aware of students using complete sentences who prior to doing these exercises filled their writing with fragments and run-ons. It may not be the ultimate answer to all of our students' writing problems, but I know that it has helped my students, and after all, it is my own classes which concern me most.

I intend to make considerable use of sentence combining in my writing classes. I've already done some revision of exercises plus I've selected a variety of the student-produced exercises for future use. I've been collecting further reading on the subject and expect to do considerable work on my program during the summer months. What I've seen excites me and I am anxious to do more. With additional research and development, my sentence-combining program should expand and improve--and as it does, so should the quality of my students' writing.

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